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Career Coach: Leading from behind to let others shine

by JOYCE E. A. RUSSELL SEPT. 2, 2012

*“A candle loses nothing by lighting another candle.” – James Keller*

You’ve just gotten that promotion, and now you are in the leadership position you’ve been seeking. Power, fame, fortune are all within your grasp. Or are they?

Many new leaders believe it is their time to shine, but that doesn’t mean all the light should shine on you. It should be just as important to share the limelight with your leadership team and be of service to others.

Many people ask me why leaders today get into so much trouble as they rise in organizations. While there are many reasons, one key problem is that new leaders can get caught up in the trappings that go along with the position — the great parking spot, the corner office, administrative assistants, greater budgets, and so on.

Some think they need to adopt a larger-than-life persona and ego to act the part.

But is that really necessary?

Max De Pree, leadership author and former chief executive of furniture maker Herman Miller, said, “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant.”

Along those lines, the late Robert Greenleaf founded the Center for Servant Leadership decades ago, arguing that true leaders are those who lead by serving others.

“The servant-leader is servant first. ... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. This means that those we serve grow — they become healthier, wiser, more autonomous, or freer. ... Managers are in the business of growing people — people who are stronger, more autonomous, more self-reliant, more competent and healthier.”

Some of the world’s best-known leaders — Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King Jr. — were servant leaders.

“Lead from the back — and let others believe they are in front,” Nelson Mandela once stated as part of his leadership lessons.

In business, Herb Kelleher, the former chief executive at Southwest Airlines; Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart and Sam’s Clubs stores; and Darwin E. Smith, chief executive of Kimberly-Clark, all seemed to follow the view that they were leaders to serve others.

“Good to Great” author Jim Collins studied successful companies and found they often were run by “Level 5 Leaders”— those who displayed a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. They are ambitious, but their ambition is channeled first to the institution, not themselves. That is, they channel their ego needs away from themselves and to the larger goal of the company or institution. Collins said (and I agree), that some leaders love being in the position to get things for themselves — fame, fortune, power and adulation. But there are other leaders who love being in the position to build things — to create and contribute to the larger purpose or goal. We have all probably seen both types of leaders, and the difference each can have on the attitudes and behaviors of their employees, peers and customers.

Leaders who are after getting things for themselves have trouble giving others credit. They discount others’ contributions in private or public as a way of making sure the light is still on them; that others know they are the ones in charge. It can be subtle comments or actions (“When you gave your talk, you forgot to mention this point”) or more direct ones (“My idea is to ...” “I am the one who created this program ...”). This can come back to haunt them. People tell me their worst bosses were those who publicly criticized others, made sarcastic demeaning comments or took credit for their team’s successes.

It can be a struggle for new leaders to manage the trappings of their positions. The outside world often piles up credit near their doorstep, and it takes a strong person to make sure that credit is reflected back on their team.

Greenleaf suggests strengthening your leadership by giving credit where it is due:

“Leave a creative force in the situation where you work so that the effect of your presence is a sustained living, beautiful thing. You may have the power to destroy, to hurt, to demean; but you should remember that even the bee fertilizes the flower that it robs.”

Perhaps as leaders, we should remember we are called to these positions to serve others and the greater good.

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- 2) Who is the intended audience?

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